

From "[Hyped Up](#)," by Greg Scandlen:

Medical Errors.

They are tragic when they occur. Certainly hospitals should be places of safety, not of peril, and hospitals need to deal seriously with issues like medication errors, preventable infections, and even mundane things like hand washing between patients. But injecting hysteria is not helpful. One commentator was quoted as saying, "The equivalent of 390 jumbo jets full of people are dying each year due to likely preventable, in-hospital medical errors, making this one of the leading killers in the U.S." [1] Egads.

In fact, the 98,000 figure came from a report by the Institute of Medicine, "To Err is Human." It was the very top range of an estimate that ranged from 44,000 to "perhaps as many as 98,000" deaths. These estimates are based on exactly two studies in very localized areas that were then extrapolated to the entire population. The higher one was based on an examination in 1984 – twenty-four years ago – of 31,000 admissions in New York that found 173 patients who died "at least in part because of an adverse event," according to a review in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)[2]. Even the definition of an "error" was suspect, being based on the opinion of three physicians who reviewed the medical records. The lead researcher of these two studies, Trowen Brennan, MD, JD, cautioned against reading too much into his results, as reported by John Dunn, MD, JD in an analysis published by the Heartland Institute. [3] The lower estimate of 44,000 deaths is based on a more recent (1992) review of hospital records in Utah and Colorado that was similarly extrapolated to the entire population.

Taken together the two studies might have raised a number of questions the IOM ignored. Such as, why the drastic difference between New York in 1984 and Colorado/Utah in 1992? The

second study found a problem less than half as severe as the first one. Is medical practice so very different in the two locations? Did conditions change from 1984 to 1992? [4] Is one population at greater risk than the other? These are provocative questions that would have intrigued a serious researcher, but the Institute of Medicine had no interest in serious research. It wanted to rush out with a scary number and did so. But projecting the one-time experience of a single locality on the entire nation has no credibility whatsoever.

Whatever else might be said about the problem of inpatient errors, one thing is certain – the guesstimate of 98,000 deaths per year is wrong. Yet the media continue to tout it.

[1] http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0EIN/is_2004_July_27/ai_n6125154

[2] Clement J. McDonald, Michael Weiner, Siu L. Hui, Deaths Due to Medical Errors Are Exaggerated in Institute of Medicine Report. JAMA. 2000;284:93-95.

[3] John Dale Dunn, M.D., J.D., “The Patient Safety Crusade: A Phony Crisis, Heartland Institute, December, 2006,
<http://www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artId=20290&CFID=3892739&CFTOKEN=86028232>

[4] This is not as unlikely as it might seem. The Agency for Health Care Quality and Research issued a report in October, 2007 that found a dramatic decrease in hospital-based mortality between 1994 and 2004. The death rate for some diagnoses was cut in half over that time and for six diagnostic conditions alone there were 136,000 fewer in patient deaths in 2004 than would have been expected in 1994.

http://rs6.net/tn.jsp?t=pw8svhcab.0.0.zoskxnbab.0&ts=S0304&p=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.premierinc.com%2Fquality-safety%2Ftools-services%2Fsafety%2Fsafety-share%2F12-07-downloads%2F1_AHRQ-Mortality-rate-decline.pdf